CHAPTER 16

Inventing the French Revolution
Staël Considers National Credit, 1789–1818

> Did nations combat to make *One* submit,
> Or league, to teach all kings true sovereignty?
> Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–1818), III 165–166

This third chapter on Restoration Europe offers a final panel to Staël's overview of the continent: her praise of England in her posthumous *Considérations sur la Révolution française*. More particularly, it concerns national, public credit, with two axes. First, it argues that Staël's theory of credit is richer than that of the tyrants, from Convention to Empire, who exiled the woman they owed two million francs. She calls such tyranny myopic, like building an economy on theft; modern states require public credit. Second, later history again denied Staël credit, exiling her from their all-male Revolution canon by seeing women's chatter where her dialectic stood.

Staël's *Considérations sur la Révolution française* were an instant and overwhelming success. In 1818, Staël was at the summit of her European fame. Her book appeared jointly in London and Paris, and to the flood of newspaper reviews, Louis de Bonald, Jacques-Charles Bailleul, and Aristarque-Marie de Maleissye added three entire books in answer within the year. Jacques Godechot alleges 60,000 copies, which seems unlikely, but G. E. Gwynne argues that "c'est avec les *Considérations* que la Révolution entre pour ainsi dire dans l'histoire." Staël's bestseller repeatedly maps out fields of thought, such as her "Two Revolutions" polemic, reworked by successors from Alexis de Tocqueville or Karl Marx to François Furet or Albert Soboul. Indeed, Restoration France stands beneath the sign of Coppet. Like Staël, Tocqueville contrasts rootless Bourbon absolutism with Anglo-Saxon political society; Marina Valensise's 1991 study of François Guizot opens with eight pages contrasting Guizot's monarchism

This chapter is previously unpublished.

with Staël's and Benjamin Constant's otherwise similar Directoire republicanism, 1795–1799, while neglecting their further decades shaping French politics. This "Thermidorian myth" is a common lacuna in revisionist research; compare "Constant," "Guizot," and "Staël" in François Furet and Mona Ozouf's *Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française*.[1]

How then could Staël fade so easily from the Revolution pantheon of her male heirs? Her book saw one edition in the twentieth century. It is not the quality of Staël's prose, for she tells a magnificent, savage, and touching story. From 1818 to 2018, Staël has faced three charges – amateurism, gossip, and illogical bias – designed to shut her up, to return her public discourse to woman's private space. Frank Bowman thus reviews the "indéniable antiféminisme" of Stendhal's, Louis de Bonald's, and Jacques-Charles Bailleul's reactions. Bonald calls her book a *factum* written for her father, since women always place domestic ties above public interest; he and Bailleul agree that her text is ruled by female "esprit de conversation" and gossip (227, 235). Illogical, she cannot link cause and effect nor even structure an argument, says Bailleul, who naively stole her structure entire for his reply (236). Bowman dwells on Staël's economic arguments, which these readers utterly missed, calling their grasp of history "assez pauvre, primaire même" (238, 240). The *Edinburgh Review* in September 1818 commends Staël's impartiality while regretting her fragmentation (277). It also grasps her talk of credit, unlike every journal in France: "All political power, even the most despotic, rests at last, as was profoundly observed by Hume, upon Opinion" (288). King shows Staël's economist friend Jean-Charles-Léonard Sismondi treating the text in his first article as a *philosophie de l'histoire*, combining *vigueur de pensée*, *sûreté de tact*, *logique serrée*, and *éloquence entraînante*; Sismondi spots the woman in her partiality, where the *Edinburgh Review* avoided this sexism. Staël indeed opens by explicitly rejecting ad hominem historiography: "[I]ls ont pris les acteurs pour la pièce" (*CRF* 63). The economist Sismondi's two later articles focus on credit: "Une grande injustice dans l'opinion publique . . . démonétise l'espèce qui porte l'empreinte du peuple" (King 67). Compare her partner Constant's review: Staël, impartial, has too *little* anecdote; the old regime like Napoleon brought on its own inevitable fall; public opinion and trade create modern credit, which "rend l'autorité dépendante." Gwynne reviews the reactions of Bonald, Joseph de Maistre, and François-René de Chateaubriand (262–271) alongside articles from fourteen Restoration journals (272–283): Bizarrely, the official *Moniteur universel* defends her, but from left to right, almost all miss the function of Jacques Necker and England in her dialectic, even her allies in

the *Journal de Paris* and the *Constitutionnel*. The *Minerve française* lets Antoine Jay complete Constant's unfinished review thus: "Son esprit a souvent été la dupe de son cœur" (280). The one-eyed sexism of this reaction merits detailed study. Her skeleton, it argues, is formless and weak; she prefers salon gossip to economic debate; and she reduces history's sweep to people she likes or dislikes. These charges rely on alleged baby fat – anecdotes, long extracts, praise for Necker and England – that disqualify Staël's memoirs from manly historical discourse. Staël is returned to the *oikos*, where her "private" discourse may be ignored by the menfolk.[2]

Even today, critics miss Staël's careful propaganda, like eager geographers mapping *Gulliver's Travels*. Yet the *Considérations* are a weapon, like all Staël's works, and like all weapons they aim at the future – transforming dead history into living political polemic. Two further dialectics underline the coherence of Staël's thought. First, Staël does talk finance, with her own biting economic explanation of Revolution and Waterloo alike – in 1818, a radical synthesis of traditional arguments that puts Staël squarely in the mainstream of traditional political philosophy. Second, she applies this socioeconomic argument to her thirty-year-old reflection on the use of art in the world, offering a vision of the new contract between modern nations and their leaders that can make Europe's later Romantic authors seem provincial by comparison. She owes this broad dialectic to her womanhood, and it seems her readers missed its presence for the same reason.[3]

Staël makes this vision universal, but it derives from economics: It is the idea of credit. Napoleon, says Staël, lost a twenty-five-year European war because he had cash but no credit. For as Montesquieu hints, dictators do not inspire credit. England, a state that empowers its nation, had good credit and won the war. This fine model combines Coppet's thought on art and economics and shows morals as the key to long-term political success. England and Necker are thus not girlish caprice here; they construct Staël's syllogism, as for Jules Michelet and Tocqueville; they are the building blocks of her fierce attack on despotism and cannot be removed. Virtuous public credit is no *chimère*, writes Staël; it beat us at Waterloo (*CRF* 524, 593). Staël links empire to lotteries, to high-interest loans, to Napoleon's bid to put Europe "en rente viagère sur sa tête" (*CRF* 391–392, 423). "Bonaparte," she adds, "qu'on persiste à nommer habile," could have given France English trade and credit; instead, he found only "l'art maladroit de multiplier partout les ressources de ses adversaires" (*CRF* 406).[4]

Economics: Necker

What is credit? Staël neatly calls it "l'opinion appliquée aux affaires de finances" (*CRF* 79), echoing both etymology and the term's root meaning in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie*. Public credit means that any modern state runs on tomorrow's money. This is a truism today; but in 1818, Staël's praise of Necker's and England's credit is deliberate banker's polemic, the last act in a complex play running from Jean-Baptiste Colbert through Napoleon. Throughout the eighteenth century, England had fought her rival France on credit and won, with a third of her land and population. The Regent allied with England, bringing John Law in 1716 to float French credit and paper money on colonial expansion; speculation led to panic, collapse, and a French distrust of foreign bankers lasting well beyond Napoleon. Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois* (1748) states a "[r]ègle générale: on peut lever des tributs plus forts, à proportion de la liberté des sujets" (XIII.xii); Staël's second part reviews England, a nation with "un crédit sûr." She notes that "[l]a France de l'ancien régime aurait succombé à la millième partie des maux que la France réformée a supportés" (*CRF* 187); her heirs censored this explicit link to Protestantism. Isaac de Pinto in 1771 attributed French humiliation in 1763 to British public credit, and Isaac Panchaud and Louis Dufresne de Saint Léon published on public credit in 1781–1784, but France outside the Genevan Necker failed to imitate England. As John Lough underlines, Anne Robert Jacques Turgot and the *Physiocrates* may approve of the Enlightenment's far-reaching linkage of freedom and free markets, but Staël like the Coppet economists Necker and Sismondi is closer to the Scottish thought of Adam Smith, praising capital and credit over wholesome agriculture. France before Napoleon III neglected these keys to her rival's success; indeed, here is the nub of the ongoing 1789 "capitalist revolution" debate.[5]

English wealth and power come from her constitution and her *esprit public*; without this conduit, Staël argues, "comme les champs seraient desséchés, comme les ports deviendraient déserts" (*CRF* 394; cf. 578). *De l'Allemagne* ends with such dry fields, and Napoleon's ports were indeed thus left to decay. Though Etienne François de Choiseul's *pacte de famille* had given France more access to Spanish silver, ships, and colonial markets, her race with England for world commerce was lost after 1763. Lax administration and war debts produced a perceived fiscal crisis, despite economic growth, in which the poor played a minimal role before 1789; Staël's top-down narrative here matches today's historians. France needed

cash in 1778; Necker answered, says J. F. Bosher, with an administrative revolution often dated from Napoleon, moving to replace private tax farming with state bureaucracy and with instant credit based not only on favorable rates but also on hard-earned public trust. As Staël notes, "[L]e crédit, c'est-à-dire l'argent, dépendait de l'opinion" (*CRF* 85, 99). Bosher outlines what Necker inherited (13–17, 92–110); "*Public* credit as we know it" did not exist (100). Quoting Lord Acton, he calls Necker "without a doubt the most skillful politician of the reign, perhaps of the century" (62–63) for his use of public opinion. He reviews Necker's administrative revolution – thereby damning Charles Alexandre de Calonne (142–165) – and the creation of the *assignats*, bitter saviors of the Republic (257–275). Eugene Nelson White concludes that "Terray, Turgot and Necker pursued essentially sound policies" (568), while Calonne's fiscal ideas were catastrophic. Staël thus insists on how stocks soared in value each time Necker returned to power (*CRF* 91, 125, 164–165).[6]

The historical Necker is slowly emerging, like his daughter, from a *légende noire* that is itself worth detailed study; for instance, historians until 1979 lazily echoed Calonne's libel of Necker's *Compte rendu* without opening the man's accounts at Coppet. Robert Harris stresses Necker's amazing gift for popularity, and his unprecedented appeal to public opinion as the lodestone of government (38, 86). Thus, Necker chose to present government finances to the people, as in England, and public dismay at Necker's exile contrasts sharply with its indifference when the now-celebrated Turgot departed. Harris also stresses Necker's conviction that capital "flees the strong arm of the government that tries to grasp it . . . and settles in countries that are liberal" (55), and he reviews Necker's major sin, the Genevan *immortelles* he used to finance American independence (117–135). He ends by citing the secret correspondence of George III: "The best men consider M. Necker's retreat a fatal stab to the credit of France, and the independence of America" (240). Staël was thus not alone in her opinion of her father. Calonne's tax farmer circle, and several French governments, distrusted Necker's "magical" methods and his cosmopolitan friends, the Banque protestante en France that Lüthy describes, tied to Amsterdam and Geneva. The Constituante rejected Necker's idea of a national bank, preferring the hard credit of *assignats* against church land with no risk of foreign meddling. Necker resigned days later. The ensuing credit disaster helped to save the Republic; it also burned rich and poor alike.[7]

Napoleon in turn opposed credit and paper money, living in mutual suspicion with his bankers, offered dukedoms to control the new Banque de France. His fiscal system followed an annual cycle: expropriation at

home, to supply campaigns whose booty met the bills – in short, a pillage economy. Staël's cosmopolitan banking friends like Jacques-Rose Récamier or Gabriel-Julien Ouvrard were bribed, bankrupted, or imprisoned. The *Dictionnaire Napoléon* entry for "Bourse" describes the two crashes of 1805–1809, the stagnation of 1811–1817, and Napoleon's suspicion and ignorance of what he rightly saw as a barometer of public opinion. The very thorough articles "Blocus continental," "Crises économiques," and "Finances publiques" add further evidence of Napoleon's limited grasp of public credit and of his failure, in the long run, to run state finance without the revenue of pillage. The Emperor fell after losing an army in Russia; but what forced him to go there? See also "Domaine extraordinaire" on pillage and "Ouvrard" on Napoleon's fights with cosmopolitan bankers. Compare Michel Bruguière on dukedoms (103–111); on Hamburg and Lübeck, both smuggling centers and also the home of Staël's banking friends Caspar von Voght and Jochim Matthäus von Rodde (137–151); on Bourbon overseas commerce, 37 percent higher than England's in 1788 and crushed by the Revolution (355–369); and on baron Louis's use of English credit methods in France after 1814 (263). Victor de Broglie and Prosper de Barante both publish *Opinions* on credit in 1823, and Constant as tribune led debate on it; there is evidently a study to write on the place of Coppet's Protestant talk of credit in the controversial air of France, 1776–1830. How to finance France without the gold of pillage? This old dilemma returns after Waterloo; it frames Staël's polemic, with Napoleon and Necker as France's two options in 1818.[8]

Staël claims that we can tell good governments from bad through their finance. Her book lists three bad and three good as evidence. The bad – the old regime, the Législative and Convention, and Napoleon – confront Necker, the early Directoire, and England. Staël's second part ends with the hijacked Constituante yielding to the doomed Législative. "Des vingt mois que la république a existé en France" (III.xxi) praises the pre-*fructidor* Directoire, again stressing credit. Without state credit, "Quel père de famille confierait sa fortune à cette loterie?" (*CRF* 90) – precisely what Staël's father had done. A seventh government remains implicit, the Restoration France Staël writes for, free to choose good or bad, bankers or despots, *Charte* or *Ultras*. This clear polemic allows Staël a unique chance to dismiss kingdom, empire, and republic at a blow, with Montesquieu's single charge of despotism; despots come and go, but the *amis de la liberté* remain the only true friends of the people, from Necker to the Doctrinaires. Or as Staël has it, "La tyrannie est une parvenue, et le

despotisme un grand seigneur" (601). Edgar Quinet and Tocqueville will rework this argument.

Staël reviews Necker less for piety than for propaganda, continuing her seamless attack:

> M. Necker affirmait . . . que jamais le crédit ne pourrait exister sans une constitution libre . . . Bonaparte a maintenu les finances de France . . . par le revenu des conquêtes, mais il n'aurait pu se faire prêter librement la plus faible partie des sommes qu'il recueillait par la force. L'on pourrait conseiller . . . aux souverains qui veulent savoir la vérité sur leur gouvernement d'en croire plutôt la manière dont leurs emprunts se remplissent, que les témoignages de leurs flatteurs. (383–384)

Yet is Staël's polemic factual? In fact, her "could nots" echo the "did nots" of the *Dictionnaire Napoléon*, under "Finances publiques": "Bonaparte a donc échoué, faute d'avoir créé un véritable crédit public." Her claim also fits the *assignats*; despite state compulsion, and their direct collateral in land, *assignats* still plummeted by 1795 to 3 percent of their face value. The Old Regime did borrow heavily, through *tontines*, *rentes*, and their cousin, venal offices; yet it borrowed less and paid more than its rival England, while Necker certainly expanded French credit, from the local *monts-de-piété* he introduced to international finance. Staël's talk of England and Necker is thus hardly the alleged "female weakness" that has deleted her book from history. It is, indeed, precisely the economic argument she has stood accused of lacking, her banker's advice on credit to the doomed Bourbon monarchs: sustained, polemical, and not carried out before Napoleon III.[9]

Politics: Napoleon

Under the Bourbons, even in the *Encyclopédie*, to receive credit in politics "marque quelqu'infériorité." Staël does discuss this " false credit," that of the courtly lickspittle: "Tant qu'il n'y aura pas de liberté en France chacun recherchera le crédit . . . [L]es emportements et les condescendances ont pour unique but le crédit, et puis le crédit, et toujours le crédit" (*CRF* 479).

Yet Staël's public credit is a different animal. *Pace* the *Encyclopédie* – "On ne dit point le crédit d'un souverain" – this credit does indeed come to rulers from below. It comes from a free nation, the true ruler, delegating its sovereignty through an inverted *octroi* – the exact opposite of Louis XVIII's *octroi* of the Charte in 1814. Combining credit theory with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famous contract, Staël reworks two central traditions in

political philosophy. The Greek *polis* was founded on public credit, as Hannah Arendt brilliantly demonstrates, and Staël routinely appeals to classical models, from Plato to Polybius – "Il fallait avant tout . . . éviter la guerre civile. Avant tout, non; beaucoup d'autres fléaux sont encore plus à craindre" (*CRF* 241; compare Polybius, *History* IV.31). People's assemblies from Geneva to Washington continued this Greek tradition, as did *philosophes* from Montesquieu to Constant. It also reappears in the *place publique* of late neoclassical and Romantic tragedy.

Arendt's *The Human Condition* offers a superb window on Staël's view of life and art, showing how profoundly Greek her worldview is, how close to Pericles in his Funeral Oration. Arendt argues from Marx that British political economy subverts the *agora*'s political space for an isolated labor/consumption existence, and unique guild members and citizens for interchangeable *animales laborantes*, whose model is factory division of labor – reducing life to getting and spending, mirrors of "the twofold metabolism of the human body." As we reenter the animal cycles of nature, the artist becomes "the only 'worker' left in a laboring society" (108–111). The meaning, or value, public space affords is plucked out of our existence. This creeping isolation is Staël's enemy. As a woman, she saw more clearly than others how Enlightenment praise of *oikos* over *polis* was fine for a paterfamilias but meant purdah for half of France. As the Marquis de Sade showed, men are law inside their castles. Thus, wives under the Code Napoléon could not "take legal action, buy, sell, inherit, have identity papers, work, or have a bank account" (Spencer 45). Arendt offers countless other windows into Staël's thought. Post-Marxist critics blamed Staël for talking politics, not socioeconomics; Arendt calls Marx's idea that all politics is social a blindness he took from classical economics (31). She says that excellence cannot exist without public credit, and that mass society is painful because the world between us "has lost its power to gather [us] together, to relate and to separate [us]" (44, 48); that the private–public distinction "coincides with the opposition of necessity and freedom, of futility and permanence, . . . of shame and honor" (65); that public space gives meaning, and that "to be deprived of it means to be deprived of reality" (178); and, finally, that "power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds are not brutal" (179). All this directly parallels Staël's dialectic; Montesquieu, and Staël in her turn (*CRF* 388), saw that tyranny, which rests on isolation, was not, Arendt argues, "one form of government among others but contradicted the essential human condition of plurality, the acting and speaking together which is the condition of all forms of political

organization . . . [I]t generates, in other words, impotence as naturally as other bodies politic generate power" (181).[10]

Two centuries before Isaiah Berlin, Staël's partner Constant stands the negative freedom of modern political economy against the *agora*'s positive freedom; indeed, Robespierre said much the same on 2 nivôse an II. Staël instead links Greece and England, rejecting Benthamite laissez-faire; for her as for Rousseau, freedom demands public space and civic self-government – hence her praise of Necker's provincial assemblies, a pragmatic answer to the old dilemmas of delegated sovereignty and oversize republics. Nor in this context can Staël afford to attack the Estates General. This luxury may be suitable for the Parlements, hereditary lobby groups posing as the people's champions behind the myth of England. Necker indeed had lost his post to them in 1781. But Staël's dialectic requires a nation's assembly for the French, and the Estates General must serve. They were summoned to vote on finance; yet when they resent Necker then talking finance to them instead of the constitution that was not their business, Staël cannot mention that irony (*CRF* 141).[11]

Burkhardt Steinwachs brilliantly contrasts laissez-faire egotism with Staël's electric bond of hero and nation, her Schillerian answer to naive cynicism, Jacobin disaster, and private isolation. He quotes Staël in *De la littérature*: "C'est une science à créer que la politique . . . La morale doit diriger nos calculs" (*DL* 367, 374). Staël's new social contract answers the problem Jeremy Bentham had already given her a year earlier: "Dans Bentham le germe de l'ouvrage que je conçois sur la législation de la morale" (*CA* 422). George Sabine's work supports my claim for Staël's place in political history. Rousseau refuses deputies, thus opening the door to mob rule and tyranny; Staël avoids this error (499). Meanwhile, facing the totalitarian state is the minimalist, capitalist state run on enlightened self-interest, leading through Thomas Hobbes and Bentham to the present day (448, 486, 555–561). But the *agora* offered more than accountability; it formed an organic symbiosis between nation and deputy. Plato's own *Laws* found a makeshift answer to this loss in the mixed state, a favorite solution since; Staël is among the few to return to a pre-Platonic symbiosis (78, 150, 469). She thus avoids the rival camps of Jacobins and utilitarians, and the two creaky visions of the state they have bequeathed us. Necker and his daughter both reject the utilitarian faith in natural law that Sabine finds silly; a whole French historiographical tradition has damned the two for doing so. Sabine goes on to stress a Protestant tradition linking credit and contract theories, notably the 1579 *Vindiciae contra tyrannos*, and appealing to pre-absolutist feudal states, like Sismondi (192, 287,

320–326). Staël's appeal to English history offers her a Protestant continuity of credit and contract theories, reaching back to feudal Europe, which Catholic and revolutionary France was unable to offer, as Quinet for instance insists. Sabine comments that the French before 1800 "could not import" this British heritage of thought and institutions that allowed Locke "to attach his philosophy to a tradition continuous with St Thomas and the Middle Ages" (462). Staël's England, like Sismondi's Italian medievalism, helped their adopted nation to resolve that difficulty. Or as Staël puts it, "[C]e qui est ancien, c'est la liberté; ce qui est moderne, c'est le despotisme" (*CRF* 442).[12]

Post-Marxist French historiography has often accused Staël's and Guizot's bourgeoisie of seizing power for themselves in the people's name. But twenty-six million citizens, men and women, cannot govern as one; they must deputize, and Staël reviews their contract in oddly Greek terms. For this contract's guarantee is speech, which is the coin of power (*CRF* 229). The nation produces heroes who stand for it; they meet on the public stage to govern their people, spurred on by emulation and a public discourse for their voters to give credit to. Staël likes tribal elders as much as all her contemporaries, and also favors the stability of wealth, but the career of talent is open to almost all citizens (*CRF* 226). French women first got the vote in 1944; Staël's Zulma addressed her assembled nation in 1794, as did Corinne in 1807: "[J]e m'abandonne à l'impression que produit sur moi l'intérêt de ceux qui m'écoutent" (*Corinne* 57). Staël herself addresses the nation with every book she writes, though, despite her stress on women's civic discourse, she cannot request the vote for women, political suicide after the lost hopes of 1789. Olympe de Gouges went to the guillotine. Necker and the Constituante represent those heroes who speak with the nation's voice; Staël binds their assembly to England by calling it a *communes*, a term used briefly in May–June 1789, just as she calls Napoleon's assemblies *divans* to bind them to Montesquieu's Persian despotism (*CRF* 205, 381).[13]

Despotism, says Staël, occurs when her proposed contract breaks down and the people's credit is refused. These mute and suffering nations – "la France silencieuse" – are slaves to their passions in a revolution; Staël contrasts the public torture of Damiens under Louis XV, presage of '93, with the protection a free nation affords the madman who shot at George III. Staël is among the first to blame Bourbon absolutism for the Terror; in 1814, she and Sismondi similarly argue that despotism crushes the arts. The French nation is the true hero of Staël's narrative: An irresistible force in 1789, it is slowly corrupted by terror and lies until in 1815, mute, spent

and bewildered, it watches impassively as its Corsican master falls to the Russians. "Dans ce grand débat, la France est demeurée neutre . . . [C]ette nation si vive . . . était réduite en poussière par quinze ans de tyrannie" (433, 454).[14]

Meanwhile, two things happen to the lonely despot. First, as in Montesquieu or, say, the Greek historians, the corruption of absolute power precedes death. Despots are cut at the root – Montesquieu's image – from the nation that gives them meaning and life. The political necessity of war and a mad ambition to defy nature combine to destroy them (see *CRF* IV.xix, "Enivrement du pouvoir"). Napoleon is better evidence here than the Bourbons, and Staël traps him in a web of metaphor drawing on her vast reading: Greek talk of Persia, Roman talk of emperors, Enlightenment talk of China and Turkey. She even compares him to Gottfried August Bürger's Wild Huntsman, madly defying his *génie tutélaire* (431–432). Staël's second argument moves beyond her eclectic authorities. The despot stands in a mirrored room. She blames Louis XIV for turning Versailles into an immense hall of mirrors, where the Bourbon rulers looked for the nation that fed them and saw only reflections of themselves (76, 153, 157, 162). The Bourbons, she writes, knew in January what they would do in December, and she compares them to the man who fell from a third-story window, saying, "Cela va bien, pourvu que cela dure" (589–590). Napoleon, too, "a fini par ignorer qu'il faisait froid en Russie dès le mois de novembre . . . Son despotisme était tel qu'il avait réduit les hommes à n'être que des échos de lui-même . . . [I]l était ainsi seul au milieu de la foule qui l'environnait" (427; cf. 398, 415, 426). In his final campaign, the Emperor asks his generals for allied troop movements, and they will only echo his guesses (433). Force depends on a contract with others; for the despot, that contract is irredeemably ruptured. Any leader who neglects his nation shares that danger, whether from election or from revolution.[15]

Staël thus sharply contrasts real and apparent political power, a maxim of history much repeated since she wrote. She stresses the futility of absolutist foot-stamping without the collateral of public trust, as unreal as the Bourbon ribbon sealing the Tuileries (243). Togaed deputies will leap at bayonet-point through the windows of the Assemblée (360–361); Marshal Ney will ride out to capture Napoleon and then go over to him; Napoleon will appeal to the nation and the nation will watch him fall in silence. Compare Louis Auguste de Breteuil and Jean-de-Dieu Soult, stamping their feet like Cadmus as if to "faire sortir de terre une armée" (*CRF* 151, 473–474). As she writes of Soult, "Où forger ce sceptre quand on n'a pour soi ni l'armée ni le peuple?" Appeals to force are not magical

passwords, "et on peut les prononcer du ton le plus rude sans être plus puissant pour cela" (474). Staël compares this false power to Ariosto's still-fighting dead giant, or the resurrected Inès de Castro (347, 471). Worship of force guarantees only that your friends will desert you at the crunch; thus, Staël writes of "les flatteurs de Bonaparte, qui n'offraient à leur nouveau maître que leur rapide abandon du précédent" (*CRF* 480–481; and see *CRF* 411, 464).

Real political power – the force of twenty-six million people – depends on convincing the nation that you serve it, as the Second French Republic, for instance, discovered in the elections of 1848. Here, Staël faces a profound obstacle, those who pretend they serve the people: "Le triomphe de Bonaparte, en Europe comme en France, reposait en entier sur un grand équivoque qui dure encore … Les peuples s'obstinaient à le considérer comme le défenseur de leurs droits … [I]l en était le plus grand ennemi" (425; cf. 310, 587). The First Republic is especially awkward; to a modern reader, the oddest thing about Staël's *Considérations* is a book on "the Revolution" with just two parts in six devoted to the 1790s. But with a Louis on the throne, Staël downplays the Jacobins to focus on Necker and England, Napoleon and 1816, because for her the hijacked Revolution must heal to shape the future. Her book is a political tool, pruned of the dead wood of the Terror for maximum effect: "Il est temps que vingt-cinq années … ne se placent plus comme un fantôme entre l'histoire et nous" (604). Staël thus breaks with Restoration charges of anarchy, to insist instead on the Convention's absolute power – despotic, it joins Napoleon and the Bourbons, aligned against Staël's *amis de la liberté* to oppress and silence the nation they love. Compare Staël on the Convention's "terrible doctrine de l'établissement de la liberté par le despotisme," or her claim that "jamais une autorité plus forte n'a régné sur la France" (235–236, 305).[16]

For twenty-five years from 1790, we were swindled, says Staël, by demagogues who usurped our Revolution. Compare her stunning anatomy of hypocrisy in Bonaparte's early words and acts (IV.i–iv), or the brilliant attack on the Bishop of Troyes (VI.xi). Their forgers' rhetoric dismays her, both cynical and blasphemous. Virtue and enthusiasm should guarantee the coin of speech, an "electricity" linking deputies with nation, as Plato's *rhapsodes* link gods and people: "[C]'est la parole qui a fait sortir de terre les légions" (*CA* 272). Republican traditions are happy with this argument, but Staël adds evidence; her much-maligned extracts from Necker, England, and the Constituante are there to balance her counter-evidence of lying to the nation (*CRF* 377, 468). This could hardly please ensuing French governments, which lived on those lies.[17]

Art: Staël

> Un républicain écrit, combat ou gouverne selon les circonstances et les dangers de sa patrie.
>
> *CA* [1798], 274

In art as in politics, Staël argues that divinely given leaders receive public credit from the thankful nation speaking through them. Nation and genius have reciprocal duties; without credit for genius, the people's mute nobility will dry up like the untilled soil of empire, and genius will speak like Napoleon into the void (*CRF* 78, 581). The Romanticism Staël gave Europe finds its purpose in this new social compact. Courtly esthetics died with the Old Regime, and the art of Europe's new nations, with its eternal virtues of truth and simplicity, demands the sanction of the empowered masses – the solitary consumer we know so well. For Staël, famous from Moscow to Monticello, the people's voice is the voice of God: "Le jugement de Dieu, dit le proverbe, c'est la voix du peuple" (254). Staël's manuscripts repeat this at least five times; her heirs, interestingly, deleted each remark. The *odi profanum vulgus* of her followers seems by comparison archaic and, for any Romantic, remarkably bad logic. What good is a popular national art that despises the people? Staël's program for the future is vast, coherent, and unprecedented – as memorable, certainly, as Stendhal's or Bentham's thoughts on the role of leaders in society, better reasoned, and seamlessly knit into what is frankly a far wider sociopolitical vision.[18]

This is a female argument in the end. With women exiled from the political and economic credit of public space, artistic credit alone could connect female genius to the silent nation it stood for and led. Why else would Staël write? Corinne and Dante, she argues, give the voice of genius to their people. Tasso is sung by gondoliers; a German *commis de barrière* meets Staël and tells her he can now die happy. "Le digne et sincère amant de la gloire propose un beau traité au genre humain," she writes (*IP* 158). Staël's *Considérations* in their turn may shape Restoration France's legislature more surely than any speech of her protégés in parliament. She thus presents herself, like her father Necker, as an anti-Napoleon, speaking like a Moses for the nations Napoleon lied to and silenced. Clearly, this nexus also says much about Staël's place in the early history of nationalism, 1789–1815.[19]

Conclusion

The theme of public credit and the search to keep it runs like a red thread through Staël's thirty years of work on society and civilization, from

Versailles to Waterloo. At Coppet, Necker, Constant, and Sismondi in particular offer a long series of parallels; but with Staël, art, politics, and economic science fuse uniquely into a seamless dialectical whole, aiming to shape her European public and thereby govern the nineteenth century.

How could this dialectic be so easily missed by history? Three pressures perhaps made readers miss the point: first, the long discredit of Coppet's liberal or progressive alliance, slowly ending at last two centuries later; second, as in *Corinne* or *De l'Allemagne*, blindness to Staël's propaganda; and third, the unspoken sexism that made readers not even look for propaganda here but instead assume that the woman could do no better. Gwynne, who likes her, litters his 1969 study with the words "elle comprend confusément"; Godechot, in the only twentieth-century edition of the text, smiles at her passionate admiration for England, and suggests "une interprétation freudienne de l'amour excessif de Germaine de Staël pour son père" (*CRF* 27–28). These critics carry their author into a hole they made and wonder at her presence there. Indeed, they do more than that. Staël's entire edifice attacks Benthamite praise of the private – all very well for a paterfamilias – by insisting on the public space that alone guarantees women's protection. When readers pretend that Staël's public discourse is private, they take away her reason for writing, the coping stone of her entire political argument. Thus, Simone Balayé cites Louis de Fontanes: "Mme de Staël n'a jamais plus de talent que lorsqu'elle abandonne son système; et ce qu'elle sent est toujours plus vrai que ce qu'elle pense" (18). Claims that her politics lacked a system clearly filled a crying need for male reviewers. Béatrice Jasinski shows Staël combining Necker and England, 1789 and 1816 as her text develops from 1810 on and debunks the silliness of those who attack Staël for not doing something else. Staël's own disarming *avertissement* has made reviews of Necker here obligatory: "Il restera … dans ce livre, plus de détails relatifs à mon père … que je n'en aurais mis si je l'eusse d'abord conçu sous un point de vue général." Gwynne shows how received ideas can blind the eye, calling Necker both unoriginal and novel in four lines (204), or saying Staël "néglige complètement les questions économiques," then praising her stress on credit (237–255). He regrets her constant talk of Necker, yet adds that "même dans l'ouvrage de Mme de Staël il n'occupe plus qu'une place à l'arrière-plan" (208)! And this is fundamental. Readers have seen too much Necker here ever since Staël's own apology, but a free eye will see that his modest place is far smaller than the omnipresence often alleged; and Staël quits approval for devotion just once in the text, at the Hôtel de Ville (*CRF* 168; cf. 105, 257–258).[20]

It seems obvious that a male author repeating the term *credit* in a book reviewing a finance minister would not be accused of the total absence of economic discussion. People have often wondered where Staël put the economics of her father and her friend Sismondi; perhaps it has not really been looked for. It shines out in her life and her letters. Staël bankrolled the Du Ponts and invested in New York property; her father lent France two million francs in 1789, a debt not repaid until 1816. Staël was exiled, in short, by men who owed her two million francs. When she comments that no sane banker would lend these despots money, she knew what she meant, be they Louis or Napoleon: "Aussi personne n'imaginait-il de prêter rien à l'état" (415). And Staël thus had two reasons to be aware of a credit issue her male readers often missed. Unlike them, she funded these French governments; unlike them, she faced a prejudice of women's public nonexistence so strong that even today, divorced women face ludicrous problems building credit ratings in our world of instant credit. Free of father and husband, Staël had cash, like the Emperor she pities, but no credit without the fight seen in her letters. Let us give her back that credit today.[21]

Finally, Staël understands compromise because of her sex. More than any male thinker, she has to excuse her genius to her public, which knew just one meaning of *femme publique*. Protestant credit theory and Greek social contracts let her forge a startling and powerful dialectical tool to bind genius and nation, a tool supremely well adapted to the new Romantic universe that gave us Hollywood and the White House. Moreover, these compromises direct her work. In 1818, Staël uses her father to shape European politics, in a *captatio benevolentiae*; in 1814, she gives Romanticism to Europe with Immanuel Kant and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as a shield, while she stands demurely on the sidelines. History has called this method female; so it is, and therein lies its virtue. But looking beyond this method – what Staël neatly calls "la philosophie des anecdotes" – the true coherence of her thought will reappear, and she may perhaps reclaim her seat at this great watershed of modernism marking the mainstream tradition of Western political thought. With *De l'Allemagne* and *Corinne*, Staël did as much as any man to create an international Romantic movement; with her *Considérations*, she did as much as any man to hand a working social contract to postrevolutionary Europe, writing so that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from this earth.[22]